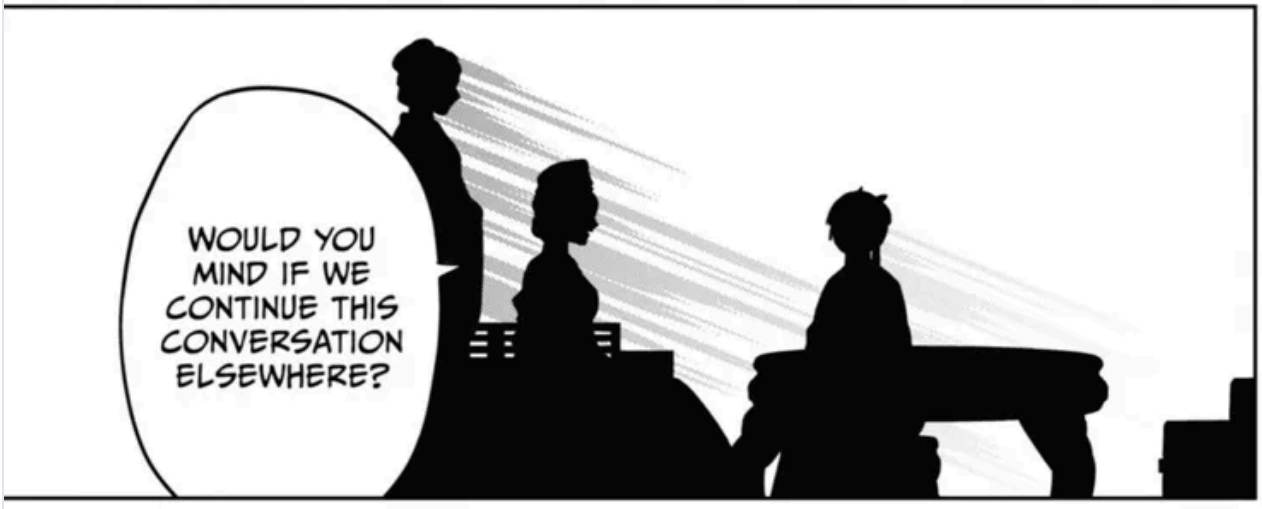
Chapter 56



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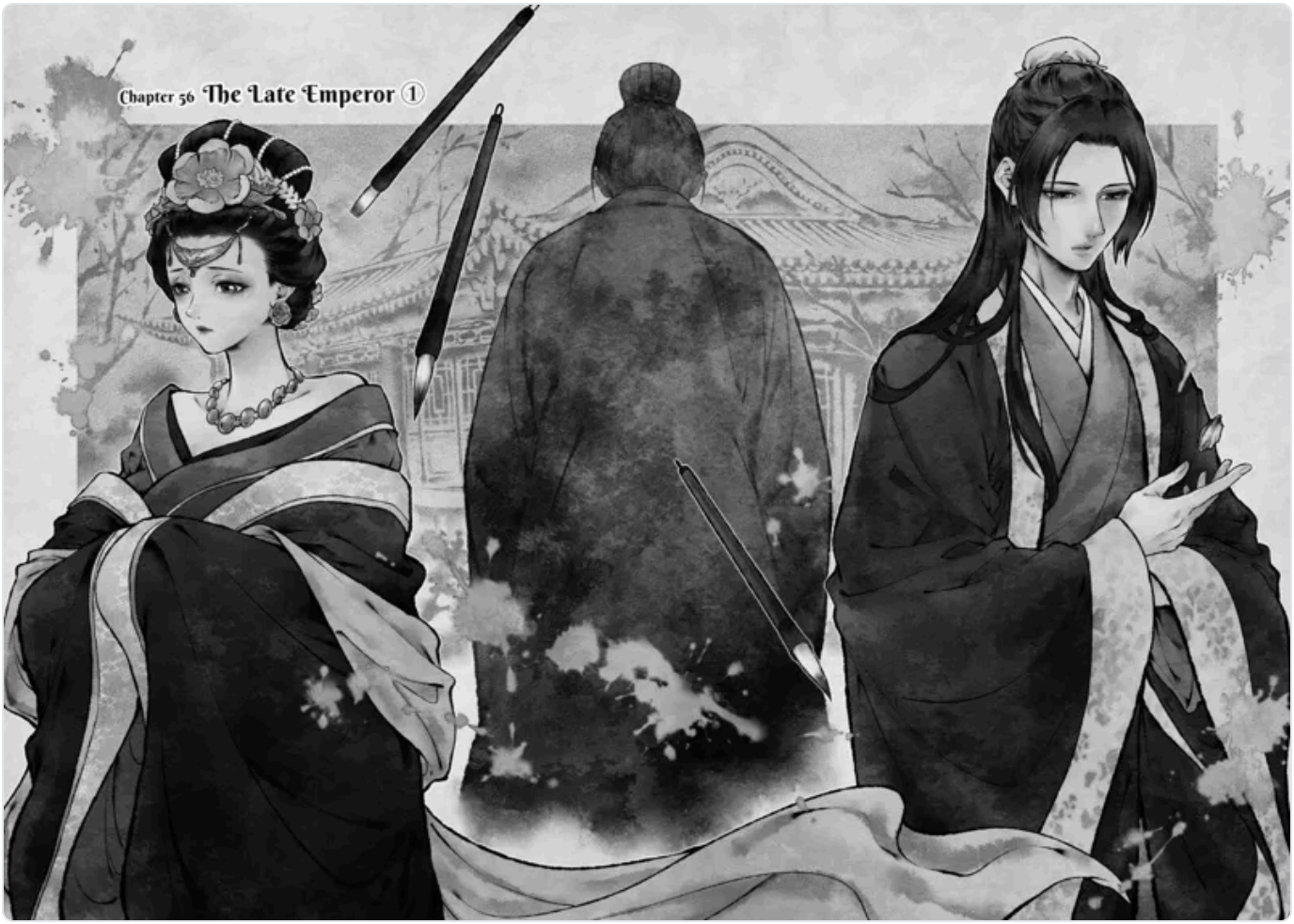
Chapter 56 The Late Emperor ①

I HAVEN'T HEARD A SINGLE GOOD THING ABOUT THE LATE EMPEROR.
"HIS TRAVESTY," THE FOOLISH RULER. THE PUPPET OF THE EMPRESS.
AT THE INNER COURT, HE WAS PROBABLY BEST KNOWN FOR HIS PREDILECTION FOR LITTLE GIRLS.
IT WAS COMMON FOR MEN TO TAKE YOUNG WIVES FOR POLITICAL REASONS OR IN REPAYMENT FOR A DEBT.
BUT WHILE THE LATE EMPEROR HAD A HAREM FULL OF NUBILE WOMEN...
...IT WAS CONSIS-TENTLY THE VERY YOUNGEST OF THEIR NUMBER HE WOULD BED, GIVEN HIS TASTES.
IN FACT, THE EMPRESS DOWAGER WAS JUST TEN OR SO YEARS OLD...
...WHEN SHE GAVE BIRTH TO THE CURRENT EMPEROR.
AND THE MAN WHO HAD BEEN FORCED TO BECOME A EUNUCH TO ASSIST WITH THAT BIRTH...
...WAS NONE OTHER THAN MY UNFOR-TUNATE PA.

AND DESPITE THE GREAT SCAR THAT MARRED HER BELLY, THE EMPRESS DOWAGER WENT ON TO GIVE BIRTH TO THE EMPEROR'S LITTLE BROTHER TOO.
...THE CURRENT EMPEROR GREW UP STRONG AND HEALTHY.
PERHAPS BECAUSE OF THE SACRIFICE IT TOOK TO BRING HIM INTO THE WORLD...
FAR PAST THE AGE TO BE CONSIDERED A GIRL.
...AND THE EMPRESS DOWAGER WAS JUST SHY OF 30 WHEN SHE BORE HIM.
AS I RECALL, THE BROTHER IS A YEAR OLDER THAN ME...
...BUT SOMETHING HAS JUST OCCURRED TO ME.
I COULD NEVER SAY THIS OUT LOUD...
IS THE EMPEROR'S LITTLE BROTHER TRULY THE CHILD OF THE LATE EMPEROR?

A FEW DAYS LATER...
...THE EMPRESS DOWAGER ARRANGED FOR THE FOUR PRINCIPAL CONSORTS TO ASSEMBLE IN THE GUISE OF A VERY FINE TEA PARTY...
...IN THE AREA OF THE INNER COURT ...
...TYPICALLY RESERVED FOR THE EMPEROR, THE EMPRESS, AND THEIR CHILDREN TO RESIDE.
IF CONSORT GYOKUYO'S GOT THIS MUCH, THEN THE OTHER CONSORTS' LADIES-IN-WAITING ARE PROBABLY BRINGING EVEN MORE.
WE'VE BROUGHT SO MUCH THAT IT REQUIRES THREE EUNUCHS TO CARRY IT ALL.
TO THE WOMEN OF THE INNER COURT, TEA PARTIES ARE A SORT OF COMPETITION FOR SHOWING OFF.
WE CAN RELAX UNTIL THE TEA PARTY BEGINS.

CONSORT GYOKUYO IS IN THE EARLY DAYS OF HER PREGNANCY, SO SHE CONTINUES TO BE PRONE TO BOUTS OF SLEEPINESS.
EACH CONSORT WAS PROVIDED WITH...
...A COOL AND AIRY PRIVATE CHAMBER.
THERE'S EVEN CHILLED FRUIT FOR SNACKING.
I'M SURE SHE'S TRYING TO BE CONSIDERATE, BUT STILL...
UGH!
HMPH.
JUST WHAT IS SHE THINKING?
THE PREG-NANCY IS AN OPEN SECRET ...
...BUT A FACE-TO-FACE EVENT LIKE THIS COULD INVITE TACTLESS QUESTIONS ALL THE SAME.
THEY'RE GETTING AT THE FACT THAT IT'S STRANGE TO INVITE...
...A PREGNANT WOMAN TO A TEA PARTY.

BESIDES, CONSORT LIHUA IS NOBLE BY NATURE AS WELL AS BY BLOOD.
SHE DOESN'T MAKE A HABIT OF HUMILIATING HER RIVALS.
I DOUBT CONSORT LIHUA WOULD MAKE SUCH INQUIRIES FOR FEAR OF THE SAME QUESTIONS BEING DIRECTED AT HER, THOUGH.
AS FOR CON-SORT GYOKUYO ...
...IT WOULD BE UNWISE FOR HER TO PICK A QUARREL WITH CONSORT LIHUA, WHO IS OF SUPERIOR BIRTH.
GOING BY HOW SHE WAS DRESSED DURING THE INCIDENT WITH XING...
THE TWO WOMEN AVOID CONFLICT BY HAVING NO CONTACT WITH EACH OTHER.
...SHE HERSELF IS LIKELY PREGNANT TOO.
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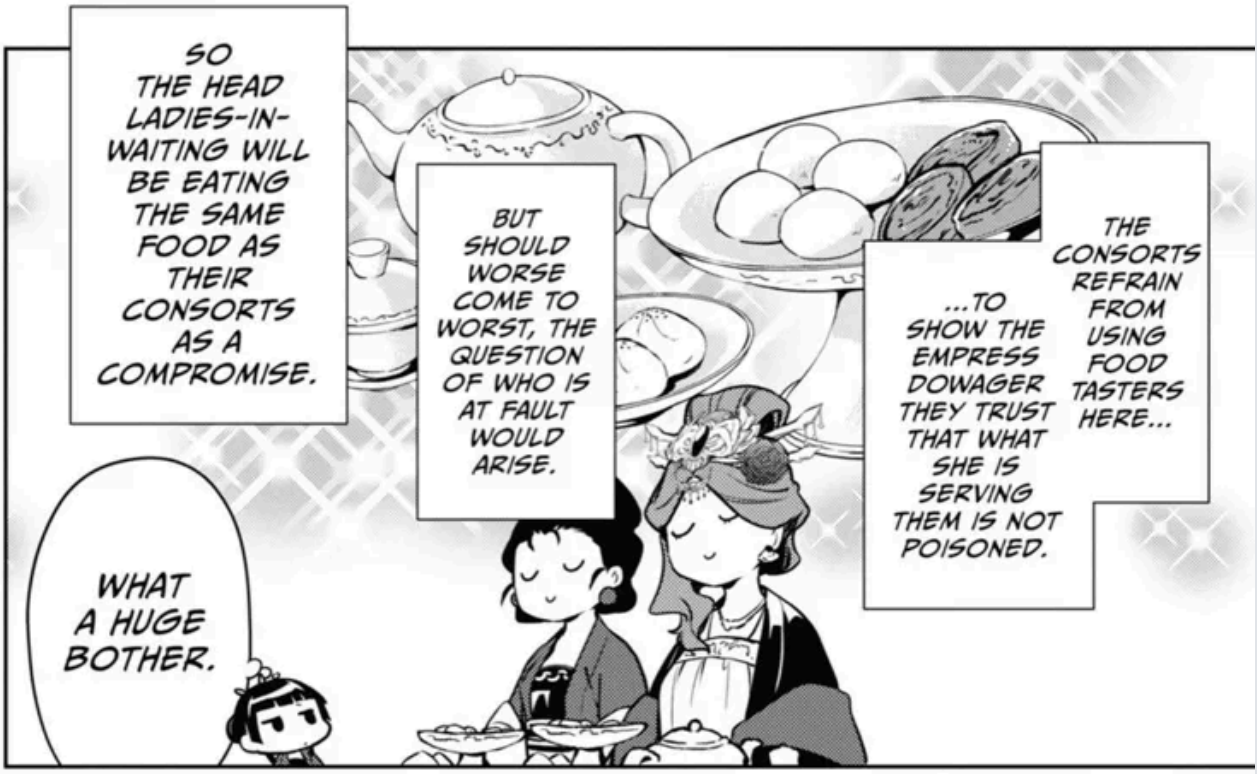
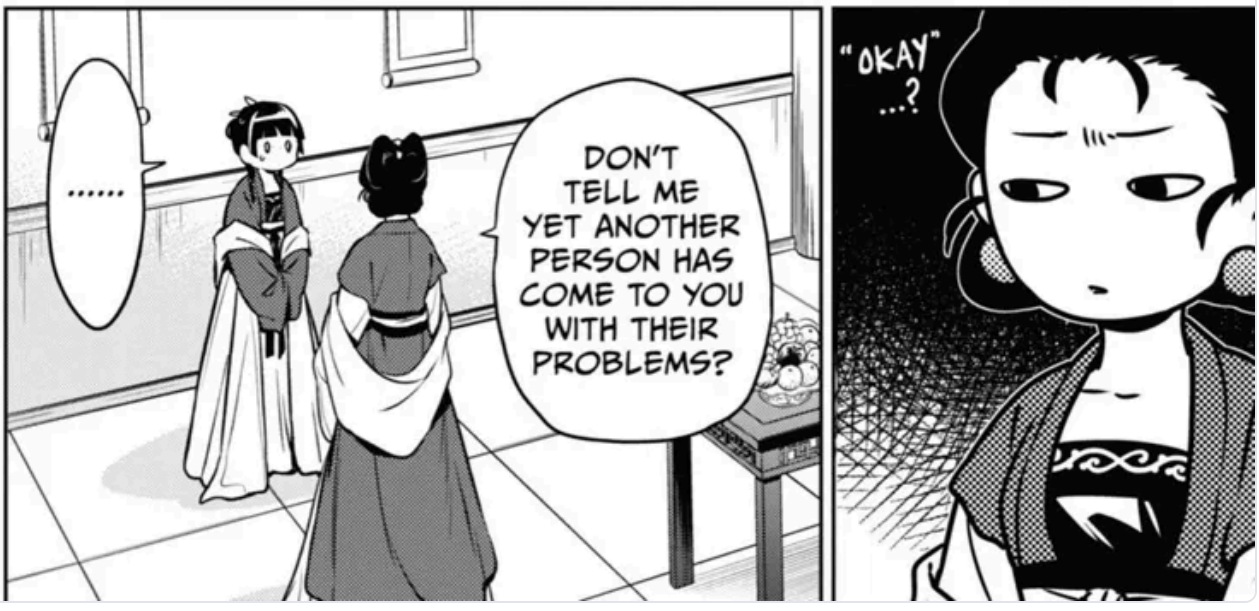
THE FORMER FOOD TASTER MUST NOT BE AS PUSHY AS THE OTHERS.
...BUT AT THE BANQUET, SHE ONLY HAD HER HEAD LADY-IN-WAITING AT HER SIDE.
...IS EASILY JERKED AROUND BY HER ATTEN-DANTS...
MEAN-WHILE, CONSORT LISHU...
YOUR FOOD-TASTING SERVICES WON'T BE REQUIRED TODAY.
OUR LADY AND I SHOULD BE EATING THE SAME THINGS.
...NOR THE HOSTESS OF THIS TEA PARTY, THE EMPRESS DOWAGER...
NOT SURE WHAT TO EXPECT FROM CONSORT LOULAN, ABOUT WHOM I HAVEN'T HEARD ANY RUMORS, CURIOUSLY ENOUGH...
MAO-MAO.
IT'S ONE OF THOSE PARTIES, IF YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN.
ALL RIGHT.


SO THE HEAD LADIES-IN-WAITING WILL BE EATING THE SAME FOOD AS THEIR CONSORTS AS A COMPROMISE.
BUT SHOULD WORSE COME TO WORST, THE QUESTION OF WHO IS AT FAULT WOULD ARISE.
THE CONSORTS REFRAIN FROM USING FOOD TASTERS HERE...
...TO SHOW THE EMPRESS DOWAGER THEY TRUST THAT WHAT SHE IS SERVING THEM IS NOT POISONED.
WHAT A HUGE BOTHER.

OKAY.
THE EMPRESS DOWAGER WOULD LIKE TO BORROW YOU.
BUT YOU DO HAVE A ROLE TO PLAY.


.....
DON'T TELL ME YET ANOTHER PERSON HAS COME TO YOU WITH THEIR PROBLEMS?
"OKAY" ...?

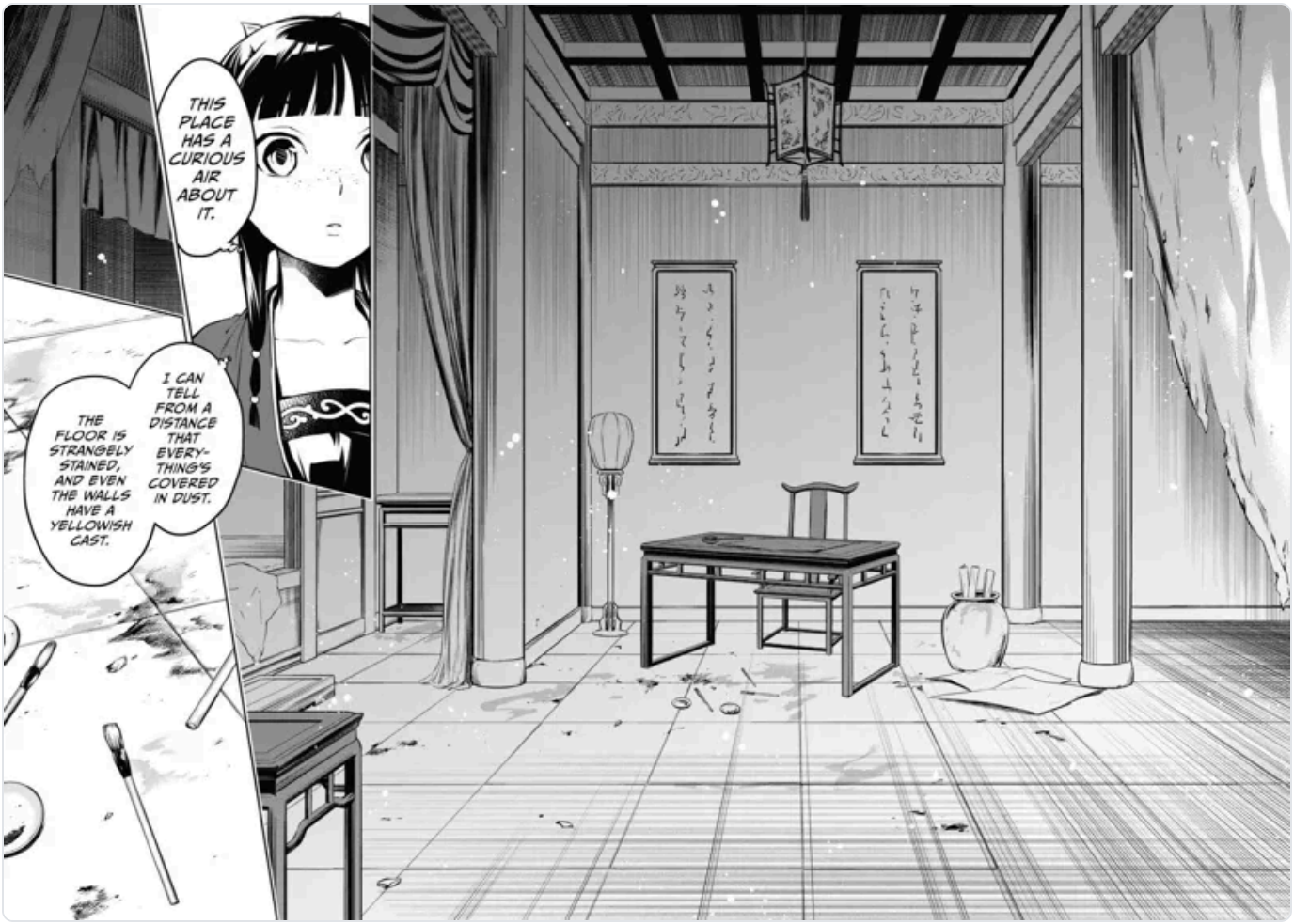
BUT!
WELL, IT'S FINE.
I'M GUESSING YOU CAN'T TELL ME ABOUT IT, IN ANY CASE.
SLAM
YOU WOULD DO WELL TO AVOID BETRAYING MY LADY.

I'M GLAD WE UNDER-STAND EACH OTHER!
I'D LIKE TO STAY FRIENDS WITH YOU TOO!
CHEERY
UH-HUH.
...THE LAST THING I WANT IS TO HAVE YOU FOR AN ENEMY, LADY HONG-NIANG.
CONSORT GYOKUYO'S LADIES REALLY ARE SOMETHING ELSE.
BDMP
BBMP

THIS AREA SERVED AS THE INNER COURT PRIOR TO THE INNER COURT WE KNOW TODAY BEING BUILT.
IS THAT RIGHT?
SHE TOLD ME BEFORE I EVEN ASKED.
THIS LADY WAS ATTENDING THE EMPRESS DOWAGER THE OTHER DAY TOO.
THE LONG BUILDINGS SURROUNDING THOSE WERE PROBABLY THE QUARTERS FOR OTHER COURT LADIES.
...MUST'VE BEEN COMPRISED OF THESE SIX PALACES I CAN SEE, WHICH WOULD'VE HOUSED THE CONSORTS.
THE OLD INNER COURT...

EVEN THE GRAVEL IN THE TRADI-TIONAL DRY LANDSCAPE GARDEN HAS BEEN RAKED NICE AND TIDY.
...BUT THEY MAKE A POINT OF KEEPING IT SPOTLESS. THERE'S NOT SO MUCH AS A SPECK OF DUST.
I DON'T SENSE ANYONE AROUND...
SHP

HERE WE ARE.
BETWEEN THE PALACES WE PASSED, HEADING STILL FARTHER BACK...
...UNTIL WE ARRIVED AT A LONG BUILDING WITH A CENTRAL CHAMBER SOMEWHAT BIGGER THAN THE REST.
CREAK
ギィ…
NOW THAT'S AN ODD SMELL.
FWOOSH


THIS PLACE HAS A CURIOUS AIR ABOUT IT.
I CAN TELL FROM A DISTANCE THAT EVERY-THING'S COVERED IN DUST.
THE FLOOR IS STRANGELY STAINED, AND EVEN THE WALLS HAVE A YELLOWISH CAST.

WHAT IS THIS PLACE ...?
THESE ARE THE QUARTERS OF THE WOMAN WHO WENT FROM BEING A MAID...
...TO BECOMING EMPRESS DURING THE RULE OF THE LATE EMPEROR'S PREDECES-SOR...
...FROM WHEN SHE WAS INSTALLED AS A LOW-RANKING CONSORT.
IT WAS HERE THAT THE LATE EMPEROR WAS RAISED...
...AND ALSO WHERE HE PASSED FROM THIS LIFE.
AS THE STORY WOULD HAVE IT, OUR LATE RULER...
...SPENT A LOT OF TIME COOPED UP HERE WITH HIS MOTHER TOWARD THE END OF HIS LIFE.
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SHUTTING HIMSELF UP IN THIS ROOM SO HE COULD CLING TO HIS MEMORIES ...
THE LATE EMPEROR MUST HAVE BEEN FAINT OF HEART.
AFTER THE THEN EMPRESS DOWAGER PASSED, HE DREW HIS LAST BREATH IN THIS VERY ROOM...
...AS IF FOL-LOWING HER IN DEATH.
UNLIKE THE PEASANTS AMONG THEIR SUBJECTS, WHO WERE THOUGHT WIZENED ELDERS PAST THE AGE OF 60...
...THE LATE EMPRESS DOWAGER WAS BLESSED WITH A LONG LIFE...
...AND THOUGH NOT AS LONG AS HERS, SO WAS THE LATE EMPEROR, HER SON.
...THAT SHE HAD CURSED HIM...
...BY WISHING HIM DEAD, NIGHT AFTER NIGHT.
WHEN THE LATE EMPEROR PASSED...
...I TOLD LADY ANSHI THAT THERE WERE NO SUCH THINGS AS CURSES.
BUT SHE CLAIMED...

THE LATE EMPEROR'S BODY WAS ENSHRINED IN THE MAUSOLEUM FOR A YEAR.
IS THERE ANY EVIDENCE OF THIS CURSE?
PEOPLE BEING MISTAKEN FOR DEAD AND COMING BACK TO LIFE ISN'T ENTIRELY UNHEARD OF...
...THERE WOULD'VE BEEN LITTLE REASON TO HASTEN THE CONSTRUCTION WITH HIS BODY ALREADY ENSHRINED.
PLUS, EVEN IF HIS TOMB HADN'T BEEN FINISHED WHILE HE WAS ALIVE...

THE LATE EMPEROR LOOKED MUCH AS HE HAD IN LIFE...
...AND EVEN HIS MAJESTY WAS GIVEN TO THINK HIS FATHER MIGHT HAVE BEEN REPLACED WITH A WELL-CRAFTED DOLL.
THE FOLLOWING YEAR, THE EMPEROR AND MY LADY WENT TO RETRIEVE THE BODY...
...IN PREPARA-TION FOR BURIAL.
SO YOU'RE SAYING THAT HIS BODY HADN'T DECAYED?
BUT THEY WERE TOLD IN NO UNCERTAIN TERMS THAT IT WAS THE LATE EMPEROR'S BODY.

YES.
THE MAUSOLEUM IS A COOL BUILDING, EVEN IN THE SUMMER.
HOWEVER, WHEN THE PAIR HAD GONE TO RETRIEVE THE PREVIOUS EMPRESS DOWAGER'S BODY, IT HAD BEEN IN AN UNSPEAKABLE STATE.
AND THEY WERE TOLD THAT WAS TO BE EXPECTED.
A CORPSE THAT DOESN'T IS AN ANOMALY, TO BE SURE.
UNLESS A BODY IS FROZEN ...
...IT WILL ROT, BECOME INFESTED WITH INSECTS, AND SHRIVEL AWAY WHEN LEFT ALONE.
NOW I UNDER-STAND.
94

WE ALL EVEN-TUALLY RETURN TO THE EARTH.
OUR BREEDING MAY DIFFER, BUT I CAN'T IMAGINE WE'RE MADE OF DIFFERENT STUFF.
THE PEOPLE OF THE COURT ARE NO EXCEPTION.

THE LATE EMPEROR PASSED SIX YEARS AGO.
HIS BODY HAS LONG SINCE BEEN INTERRED, SO THIS IS PROBABLY THE LAST PLACE THAT HOLDS ANY OF HIS MEMORIES.

THIS BUILDING IS SOON TO BE TORN DOWN.
WE WOULD LIKE YOU TO LOOK INTO THIS BEFORE THAT TIME COMES.

PARDON MY INSOLENCE, BUT MAY I ENTER THE CHAMBER?
...HMM.
UNLESS THIS MYSTERY IS SOLVED BEFORE THE DEMOLITION, THE EMPRESS DOWAGER WILL LIKELY NOT BE ABLE TO REST EASY.

VERY WELL. I SHALL ASK PER-MISSION.

IT SEEMS I'LL BE GOING BACK TO THAT ROOM TOMORROW.
LEAVE TO ENTER MUST BE GIVEN BY THE EMPEROR HIMSELF, I'M TOLD.
BUT I ASSUME HIS MAJESTY GRANTS JUST ABOUT EVERYTHING THE EMPRESS DOWAGER REQUESTS OF HIM.
I'M NOT SURE IF SUIREN HAD SOME-THING TO DO WITH IT...
...BUT JINSHI AND GAO SHUN WILL APPARENTLY BE THERE TO BEAR WITNESS.
PHEW.
IT'S BEEN A WHILE SINCE I'VE BEEN BACK TO STAY OVER AT JINSHI'S.
THE THOUGHT OF HONGNIANG'S REACTION UPON MY RETURN TO THE JADE PALACE FRIGHTENS ME RIGHT NOW.
I BET SHE'S BEEN GOING EASY ON ME THUS FAR.

I CAN'T IMAGINE HONGNIANG, WHOSE JOB AS HEAD LADY-IN-WAITING IS TO PROTECT CONSORT GYOKUYO...
...THINKS TOO KINDLY OF A WOMAN OF THE COURT WHO FREQUENTS OTHER PALACES YET REMAINS ALIGNED WITH NONE OF THEM.
...EVEN SOME-TIMES... I'M UNSURE OF WHOSE SIDE I'M ON.
OF COURSE, I'D NEVER DREAM OF DOING ANYTHING TO HARM CONSORT GYOKUYO.
BUT NEITHER DO I WANT TO ASSIST HER IN GAINING ADVANTAGE OVER THE OTHER CONSORTS.
ARE YOU DONE GETTING DRESSED?
YES.
IT'S BEEN A WHILE SINCE YOU WERE LAST HERE. FEEL FREE TO RELAX TONIGHT.
JINSHI'S PERSONAL ATTENDANT SUIREN
98

SOMEONE ELSE IS OCCUPYING THE ROOM I USED BEFORE...
...SO I'LL BE STAYING WITH SUIREN ...
...IN HER TWO ADJOINING ROOMS LOCATED IN A CORNER OF JINSHI'S RESIDENCE.
PLEASE SLEEP HERE TONIGHT.
A SIMPLE BED.
...BUT IT'S WELL-MADE AND PRETTILY DECO-RATED.
I WOULDN'T MIND SLEEPING ON THE COUCH.
I WOULDN'T BE ABLE TO SLEEP A WINK FROM WORRY IF YOU WERE TO SPEND THE NIGHT THERE, OF ALL PLACES.

IF YOU'RE IN THE MOOD TO READ TOO, GO AHEAD AND GRAB A BOOK FROM THE BACK ROOM.
THANK YOU.
WHAT A LUXURY TO BE ABLE TO READ BY CANDLE-LIGHT.
BOOKS ARE PRECIOUS. I SHOULDN'T WASTE THIS VALUABLE OPPOR-TUNITY.
SHUT
パタン!!

SHE MUST BE HOLDING ON TO HER INNER CHILD IF SHE'S READING THIS KIND OF THING.
SHP
...SUIREN AND I SEEM TO HAVE RATHER DIFFERENT TASTES.
IT LOOKS OLD, BUT IT'S BEEN LOVINGLY PAINTED WITH PERSIMMON DYE.
A WICKER TRUNK EMBROI-DERED WITH GOLDEN THREAD...
JUMP
DOES THAT BOX PIQUE YOUR CURIOSITY?

OH, I KNOW, I KNOW.
I'D NEVER DREAM OF STEALING ANYTHING, MADAM.
FRET NOT.
ぽPOP
カ
CHILDREN'S TOYS?
THESE WERE MASTER JINSHI'S FAVORITES.
HE HAD EVER SO MANY TOYS BUT ONLY PLAYED WITH THOSE HE LIKED BEST...
...SO WE WOULD SECRETLY HIDE THEM.

WHEN ONE GROWS ATTACHED TO SOMETHING, THEY CEASE TO LOOK AT ANYTHING ELSE.
HE WASN'T BORN INTO A POSITION THAT WOULD ALLOW HIM TO DO THAT.
WHY DID YOU TAKE THEM AWAY?
BUT WHENEVER WE HID A TOY AWAY...
...HE WOULD CRY INCONSOL-ABLY.
WE NEEDED HIM TO GROW UP, WHETHER HE LIKED IT OR NOT.
THAT WAS HIS MOTHER'S WISH FOR HIM.
GAO SHUN WOULD GO TO GREAT PAINS TO BRING HIM ONE NEW TOY AFTER ANOTHER...
...BUT NOTHING WOULD CHEER HIM UP.

THIS DOLL OF CARVED WOOD HAS GAINED A DEEP LUSTER FROM ALL THE HANDLING.
FOR IT TO TURN THIS DARK FROM HANDS THAT NEVER KNEW DIRT...
...HE MUST'VE PLAYED WITH IT CONSTANTLY.
I'VE HEARD THAT GROWING UP IN AN OPPRESSIVE ENVIRONMENT CAN HAVE AN EFFECT ON THE HEART.
PERHAPS THE CURIOUSLY CHILDISH JINSHI I'VE GRADUALLY BEEN SEEING MORE OF...
...IS ONE FACET OF HIS TRUE NATURE.
AND YET, EVERYONE AROUND HIM INSISTS ON TREATING HIM LIKE THE BE-ALL AND END-ALL OF BEAUTIFUL EUNUCHS, WHICH MAKES THIS EVEN MORE ABSURD TO CONSIDER.

WHAT DO YOU THINK OF MASTER JINSHI?
TELL ME...
HE'S A GOOD BOSS.
BEAR GALL
BEZOAR
...BECAUSE HE GETS ME RARE MEDICINES AND INGRE-DIENTS.
ANYTHING YOU'D CARE TO ADD TO THAT STATE-MENT?
SHAKE
SHAKE

...THIS IS...
FLIP
WHAT'S THAT SHEET OF PAPER?
SO THAT'S WHERE THIS OLD THING GOT TO!
ぱっ
FWIP
OH MY!
...HM?
WHAT'S THAT REACTION ABOUT?
I WAS TOLD TO THROW IT AWAY AND EVERYTHING, BUT HERE IT IS.

MAY I...
...TOUCH THIS STONE?
AS YOU WISH.
I WONDER WHERE HE FOUND THAT.
THE YOUNG MASTER WAS NEVER ONE TO COLLECT ROCKS.
YOU DON'T NEED TO PICK IT UP WITH A TOWEL. IT'S JUST A PEBBLE.
DID YOU TAKE THIS FROM HIM RIGHT AWAY?

GOOD THING YOU DID.
OH YES. ROCKS PICKED UP OFF THE GROUND ARE QUITE DIRTY, YOU KNOW.
THIS STONE IS TOXIC.

.....
HOW DID HE PICK UP SUCH A THING IN THE FIRST PLACE?
THAT'S WHAT I WOULD LIKE TO KNOW.
HOW COULD THAT BE?!
...SIR JINSHI WAS BROUGHT TO THE INNER COURT WHEN HE WAS A CHILD?
PER-HAPS...
I CAN'T YET SAY FOR SURE.
BUT WHAT DOES THAT HAVE TO DO WITH THE STONE?
...YES, ON A FEW OCCA-SIONS.

I HAVE A THEORY...
...BUT I HAVE NO PROOF.
ALL WILL BECOME CLEAR TOMORROW, THOUGH.
WOULD YOU MIND WAITING UNTIL THEN?